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ABSTRACT

Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC) operates the largest inmate education program in Virginia, offering associate degree programs and academic support at three correctional centers and plannning programs at two others. The program at Mecklenburg Correctional Center, which has the reputation for being one of the country's toughest prisons, has been in existence since 1984, employing a principal, five academic teachers, two vocational teachers, a librarian, and a library aide. The program opened never-before-used classrooms in the inmate living areas; instituted vocational and apprenticeship programs; and began a college program in cooperation with SVCC. Since the advent of the program, 208 inmates have earned a high school diploma and in spring 1988, the first student-inmate earned an associate degree. As expected, the primary impact of the college program has been on the student-inmates. Participation in the program bestows status on the student-inmates, provides a positive direction to the lives of those serving lengthy terms, and has resulted in improved inmate behavior. Five elements key to the success of SVCC's program are cooperation with the Department of Correctional Education; an active and sympathetic administration; flexibility in meeting the needs and special restrictions of inmates; screening and orientation of instructors and students alike; and institutional support. (EJV)

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INMATE EDUCATION: THE VIRGINIA MODEL

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INMATE EDUCATION: THE VIRGINIA MODEL

Southside Virginia Community College, with campuses in Alberta, Keysville, and Emporia, Virginia, operates the largest inmate-education program in the Commonwealth and is the only Virginia college with students on Death Row. Our address to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges today focuses on why our college has elected to pursue inmate-education as part of its mission and on how the college has developed such a successful program.

SVCC currently offers associate degree programs and academic support for vocational programs at three prisons: Mecklenburg, Brunswick, and Nottoway Correctional Centers. We have recently added the Buckingham facility to our service area, with classes to begin in the Fall of 1988, and we have contracted to provide educational services for both the security staff and the inmates at the Greensville Correctional Center when it opens in 1990. So our experience in the correctional centers is fairly broad and constantly getting broader. Each institution has a character of its own, presents problems all its own, and demands solutions all its own.

In order to underscore the issues and special features inherent in correctional education, we will examine closely the SVCC program at one prison--Mecklenburg Correctional Center. We are choosing Mecklenburg, obviously, because it showcases our greatest successes, but we are also choosing Mecklenburg because of its reputation as one of the toughest prisons in the nation. Mecklenburg made national headlines in 1985 when inmates staged a general riot and took hostages. The prison again made headlines when the Briley brothers engineered the largest death-row escape in the

history of American corrections. Mecklenburg was--and still is--a violent and dangerous place to live or work. Prisoners are escorted by guards at all times; because of their propensity for violence, inmates have single cells; C-custody inmates (incorrigibles) wear day-glow orange suits and leg and waist irons; inmates do not congregate, even taking their meals in their cells.

According to the Department of Corrections, people are incarcerated (1) to protect society, (2) to punish the criminal, and (3) to rehabilitate the inmate. However, prior to the advent of active educational programs, Mecklenburg, and Virginia's prison system generally, focused on the first two functions of corrections at the expense of real rehabilitation. Very little education was taking place within the system. Mecklenburg, for example, had no school principal, no classrooms, three teachers for five buildings, a limited program of one-on-one teaching only, and no educational program beyond the GED. Yet the typical inmate profile depicts a male, usually an unskilled, unemployed member of a minority, with little or no education. Nationally, half of all male high school dropouts eventually spend time in prison; at Mecklenburg, 80% of the men come to the institution with no high school diploma. Corrections was providing for custody (and attendant punishment) without rehabilitation--and the predictable results were inmate dissatisfaction, unrest, and the reported outbreaks of violence.

As presently structured, the Department of Correctional Education (DCE) in Virginia is unique in that it is a separate administrative unit from the Department of Corrections. In 1984 DCE formally initiated efforts to create a functioning educational program at Mecklenburg, and within six months it hired a principal (Dr. Lacy Venable) and additional staff, including five academic teachers, two vocational teachers, a librarian, and a library aide.

It opened never-before-used classrooms in the inmate living areas (pods); it instituted vocational and apprenticeship programs; and it began a college program in cooperation with Southside Virginia Community College. Additionally, Governor Gerald Baliles provided incentive for inmates to improve their basic educational skills by enacting his Literacy Initiative Program, which "encourages" inmates to earn a GED if they are to be eligible for early release. Inmates call this the "no read--no parole" program.

As a result of these efforts, at Mecklenburg prison alone (which can house approximately 300 inmates), 208 inmates have earned a high school diploma or GED. Furthermore, once student-inmates have experienced the kind of success represented by earning the GED--and for most of them this is their first educational success--they become more academically confident and ambitious. However, what is a convict able to do with a newly earned GED and newly acquired interest in education?

Dr. John Cavan, President of Southside Virginia Community College, regarded the situation of inmates within the SVCC service area in the same way he regards anyone with an educational need within his service area. They have a right to educational opportunity; and, by providing that opportunity, the College serves both the inmates and the state. For these men, the college program offers a natural continuation of their educational efforts, rewards them for their past efforts while motivating them to invest more effort into education, and institutes a work ethic in a system generally devoid of one. Thus, in the winter 1988 quarter, 29.8% of the inmate population at Mecklenburg Correctional Center enrolled in the college program; and the first Mecklenburg student-inmate graduated with an Associate Degree in spring 1988.

As expected, the primary, most immediate impact of the college program has been on the student-inmates. First, all of the inmates recognize the

status of those in the program, and the students wear their SVCC T-shirts and class rings everywhere as reminders to everyone of their accomplishments. Kenneth Meadows, a black inmate explained that he observed the men in the program and it made him "look at myself and see that other people know a lot more things than I do. And I wanted to at least get on their level of understanding. I feel I have achieved that success through the educational program." He continued to explain that he has since come to serve as a role-model to other men: "Now I am bettering myself, and they see this. The main motivation for other inmates to get into the educational program is that they see people like myself who are in college now."

Thomas "Fat Cat" Shaw, a 38-year-old white inmate, echoes Mr. Meadows: "I've been in prison 23 years and--not until the college program--I never, not ever, saw inmates tell other hard-core inmates to take their mess somewhere else because I've got to study. I was shocked when I saw that, saw guys who were that serious, and that's when I started looking at it." Mr. Shaw will receive his degree with honors at the June 1989 commencement.

In addition to bestowing status on participants, a second effect of the program has been to provide a positive direction to the lives of men wandering aimlessly in the penal system. Montie Rissell, a "natural lifer" who will never leave the system, regards the college program as a way of trying "to make up to my parents for all the trouble and grief I caused them. Also, the college program gives you a work ethic." Philip Bryant credits the college program with giving him a kind of existentialist view that makes interminable incarceration bearable: "A lot of the men have given up on the system because they don't feel they have a future. But even for me, if I don't have a future, I'm going to plan as if I'm going to have one. Because that's where

I made the mistake at first. When I was growing up, I didn't think about the future. I said it would take care of itself, and it didn't take care of itself." Finally, as Mr. Shaw comments, "We've got to make time serve us instead of us just serving time."

A third effect of the program--of benefit to the inmates, to the correctional facility, and to society in general--is the improvement in behavior exhibited by anyone with attainable goals and a healthy self-image. As Mr. Meadows noted about himself, his record at Mecklenburg since the college program has been clean, "But, you know, two or three years ago, I had a really bad record. I was jumping on police and cussing them. Now I am bettering myself, and even they see this." The college program "opened up a whole new way of thinking" for Mr. Shaw as well. "I had been blind all my life. I never cared about education. I never cared about my fellow man. I hated society. I hated law, all law. Prior to the education program, I had 56 appearances before the Adjustment Committee. I haven't had one charge in the years since, and that's not an easy task at Mecklenburg."

Another aspect of this effect--improved behavior--centers on what a man does after his release from prison. Inmate Terry Fortune realizes that "the prison system is a necessary thing," but he also reminds us that, "The majority of the guys locked up are going to get their freedom one day. So what you put into the guy's head when he's locked up, and the way you treat him when he's locked up, that's the same thing society is going to get back at them when he comes back on the streets. If you treat him like an animal the whole time he's locked up, you'll get that same animal back on the streets. But if you educate this man, give him some positive reinforcement so he'll have something to offer society when he comes back on the streets, then that's what you are going to get. To me that's the whole purpose behind the college

program." Phil Bryant agrees that simply incarcerating a man is a short-sighted social strategy: "You reap what you sow. If you eliminate the college program, if you don't sow education and give the guys something that's positive, they're going to find something that's negative. And then they'll get back out, and they're going to be worse off."

The student-inmates at Mecklenburg Correctional Center are quite outspoken about how they perceive the college program and its effects. Moreover, they support their words by their performance in the program. The college program is successful because they make it successful. Of all inmates in our service-area correctional facilities, 8% are enrolled in college programs; at Mecklenburg, 29.8% are in the program. Despite fewer educational facilities and restricted access to teachers and research resources, the inmate-students at Mecklenburg outperform students with full access to the college and its resources: 12.7% of the inmates made the President's List in 1986-87, while 3.3% of the general student body did; and 9.3% of the inmates made the Provost's List, compared to 4.1% of the general student body. Therefore, both from the vantage point of numbers of students enrolled and from the vantage point of student performance, the college program at Mecklenburg Correctional Center is an unqualified success.

Certainly, the attitude of the students contributes greatly to the success of the program, but in order to establish the program and to keep it running effectively, an inmate-education must possess five key characteristics:

1. Cooperation with the Department of Correctional Education

The first of these characteristics is cooperation between the college and the Department of Correctional Education. Each DCE establishes the nature of the educational program at the prison, and Mecklenburg's is the success it is because the principal, Dr. Lacy Venable, motivates both his staff and

(c) Correctional education requires curricular flexibility. Some courses routinely use potentially dangerous chemicals or implements (e.g., chemistry, biology) and cannot be conducted as usual. For a college program to be successful, it must work within the guidelines of each prison to structure a curriculum meeting college standards as well as security regulations.

(d) Finally, if a correctional-education program is to operate successfully, instructor flexibility is absolutely necessary. This flexibility includes conducting classes in a non-traditional environment; make-do rooms only marginally suitable for teaching or learning, inmates' living pods with their attendant sounds and tensions, and other unusual areas never envisioned by anyone as classrooms.

This flexibility includes creating an educational atmosphere where respect and concern for the honest exchange of ideas flourishes--in an environment where such respect and concern are almost universally absent.

This flexibility includes beginning a course with a student in the classroom, continuing the course by independent study when the student is sent to "jail," and completing the course by correspondence when he is transferred to another facility.

And this flexibility includes making countless other adjustment no on-campus instructor could ever anticipate.

4. Screening and Orientation

Prisons are extraordinary places, that is, beyond the ordinary experience of most people; and working in one in any capacity requires special qualities. Therefore, for a college program to be successful within a correctional facility, the people directly involved in that program--instructors and students alike--need to be screened. Prisons are dangerous enough without adding classroom confrontations generated by aggressive inmates or paranoid instructors.

Instructors who would really rather not teach in prison should not because instructional education requires understanding, humor, and the ability to both demand and show respect. The same qualities are required of student-inmates, and those who lack these qualities should also be withheld from the program by prison officials.

Even with all the necessary personal qualities for the job, an instructor should still receive an appropriate orientation to prison education. Not only is the environment intimidating, but the men and the situation itself are also intimidating. Familiarizing instructors with prison regulations, acceptable and unacceptable behavior, inmate psychology, and generally what to expect can affect an instructor's success and both his emotional and physical well-being.

5. Institutional Support

While it takes place at a site remote from the college, prison education cannot be separate from the primary mission of the college; and any college which accepts a contract to provide inmate education owes the inmate-students as much support as it can legally give them. Regular faculty and staff frequently resist any association with a correctional facility, but that facility requires their services. This means that colleges with prison programs must restrict hiring of new faculty and staff to people who agree to go into the prisons and must encourage others to cooperate with the correctional education program: after all, inmate-students still need financial-aid counseling and registration information and courses from every department.

The campus educators frequently resist recognizing the accomplishments taking place in correctional facilities. How many inmate-students are eligible for the Honors Program, for inclusion in Who's Who, for scholarship assistance, or for honors lists? Yet most inmate-students work harder

and produce a higher quality of academic work than their on-campus counterparts. Institutional support, then, includes recognizing inmate accomplishments with the same enthusiasm and public display accorded traditional students.

The inmate-education program conducted by Southside Virginia Community College does not possess these five characteristics in their full maturity yet, but our program is a success-the most successful such program in the Commonwealth--because we possess all of them to some degree and are constantly working towards full realization. What drives Dr. Cavan and those of us involved in inmate education is the conviction that education can make a difference in a convict's life, that it can provide personal and professional insights to prepare these men for reentry into society.

The Commonwealth of Virginia currently houses over 11,000 inmates in 60 correctional facilities at an average cost of $22,000 per inmate. Without educational programs, the state is spending $22 million to put back on the street (as inmate Terry Fortune says) the same man, or worse, who entered the institution. Our college program within the correctional facilities is predicated on the etymological roots of the word "education." They mean "to lead out," and our experience with this program is that education can lead these men out of prison and into productive lives.

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his students to achieve excellence. He has the highest GED success rate of any principal in the system, and he encourages students to continue their education. Thus, the DCE can promote program continuity with the college program. DCE can also provide valuable staff orientation for college teachers, and it can work from within the institution to reduce conflict and tension between inmates and college personnel.

2. Active and Sympathetic Administration

The second characteristic of a successful program is an active and sympathetic college administration. At the highest level, the president must be committed to the program and enthusiastic in promoting it to his various constituencies--the Board, the public, other administrations, faculty, and staff. Fortunately, the primary impetus for the program has come from Dr. John Cavan, President of Southside Virginia Community College. Not only has he been extremely visible in his support on the campus and in the community, but he has also been extremely visible within the prison itself, representing the program to inmates, DCE staff, and Corrections. His frequent presence among inmates to present awards, to observe classes, or to explain policies and procedures demonstrates the College's commitment to the program and marks the program with the President's personal seal of executive interest.

On an operational level, Bill Long, Director of Continuing Education, is immediately responsible for the program. As program manager, he exhibits those qualities absolutely necessary for success:

(a) He is a regular visitor to the prisons and is easily accessible to inmates. Thus, inmates can express their concerns to the college official responsible for acting on them. This prevents inmates from becoming frustrated with the college or from placing instructors in a difficult "middle-man"

position between students and invisible administrators.

(b) He follows up on investigations of students' concerns and is prompt in responding to them. Again, failure to act promptly in dealing with inmates' concerns can cause problems both for the program and for the individual instructors who represent that program.

(c) He is foresightful and responsive with instructors. Prompt responsiveness to instructors' requests is another necessity for a program director. A request to leave an unsuitable classroom or to drop a contentious student is a potentially more serious matter in a prison than it would be on campus. Also, because student-inmates are denied the usual educational and support resources, any reasonable request from an instructor to improve the teaching-learning situation should be acted upon promptly as a matter of simple justice and as a way of demonstrating concern for the program.

3. Program Flexibility

Because so many aspects of prison education are necessarily inflexible--the walls, security regulations and the like--the college must be programmatically flexible in order to promote success.

(a) Inmate-students cannot control their money or their comings and goings as do traditional students; thus, they require more latitude in enrolling in a class or dropping a class. They may also be sent to "jail" for disciplinary reasons, so they require a more flexible attendance policy than traditional students.

(b) Inmate-students must work according to the schedule of the correctional facility. At many facilities they must also participate in institutional rehabilitation programs in order to improve their custody status. In short, they have schedules to keep and institutional demands to meet, and these require that the college program exhibit some creativity in scheduling of classes.